

Part III: The Rescue —How the Beach Was Saved

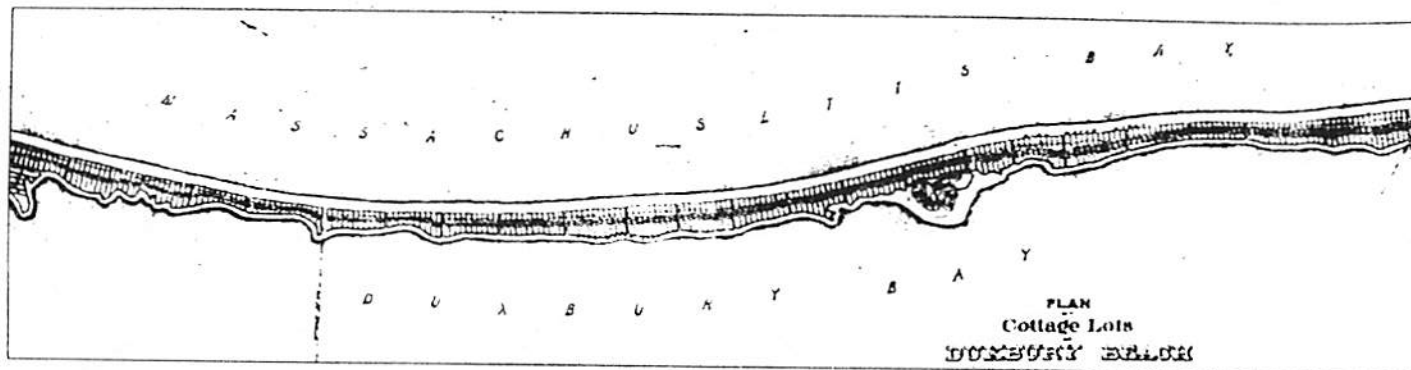
Bay in the Balance



By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

Picture this: Duxbury Beach, having become the Coney Island of the South Shore, is now home to condos, boardwalks and fast food joints with the finest kinds of sub sandwiches. Hawkers line the beach. A ribbon of concrete runs over the marshes of the Back River providing easy access to day-trippers from Boston. Sport utility vehicles are relegated to hard top parking lots. Plovers are extinct. Pigeons have replaced the other shorebirds and besides coyotes, the harbormaster's chief concern is the proliferation of rats.

Powder Point is no longer lined with roomy Victorians and antique Federals. Instead,



Congestion on the Beach — In the early 1890s, having completed the Gurnet Bridge from Powder Point, William J. Wright began work on a plan calling for 250 cottages on Duxbury Beach. Several were built, but Wright abandoned his plans after The Great Portland Storm of 1898 wrecked havoc along the entire New England coast.

Courtesy of D.R.H.S.

beach, or Salt-house, as it was first named, for \$150 from three Kingston residents: John Thomas, Hannah Willis and Zeiphariah Willis.

Early records show that houses existed on the beach prior to the town's purchase. The first, built by the Humane Society, burned down in 1824 and was later rebuilt. For the next 40 years, the town continued to own and manage Duxbury Beach.

At the onset of the town's

Duxbury. Allen planned to build a hotel on Standish Shore and use a steamboat to take visitors from Howland's Landing to Provincetown, according to historian Tony Kelso.

Allen's elaborate development plans were short lived, however, and ownership of the beach changed hands several times in the next decade until it was bought by William J. Wright in 1887.

Wright, who had considerable land holdings in Duxbury, was the real mastermind of plans to develop the beach. He proposed to his uncle George Wright, a wealthy cotton broker and merchant, that they divide up the entire length of the

Pines and two between the bridge and High Pines.

Enter Mother Nature

The Great Portland Storm of 1898 hit, smashing the entire Northeast. In Duxbury, 14-foot tides breached the barrier at several points along the beach.

"The east end of the bridge was hanging in mid-air, as the underlying sands had shifted two hundred feet west," reported Pillsbury. Shaken by the devastation, the Wrights abandoned their plans.

But that decision did not satisfy the growing fears of residents that the beach would become prey to development

law trust that would acquire the beach to protect it for the benefit of the town. It was a momentous decision.

After the purchase, the association had the three Wright houses moved on floats across the bay to Landing Road.

As a private enterprise, the Duxbury Beach Association paid local property taxes. There were never any dividends paid on members' shares, and trustees all served without compensation. They were able to buy acres of bordering marshlands and steadily removed 12 of the 18 houses and all the shooting stands from the beach. They built the first park-



Giant chunks of ice dwarf two unidentified men on Duxbury Beach. This photo was taken in the winter of 1909.

Courtesy of D.R.H.S.

there are wide boulevards, sweeping parking lots, rooming houses, more condos and stucco homes jammed on postage stamp lots. It's part of a summer playground that rivals Revere Beach.

Preposterous? Think again. If not for some good luck, some bad weather and the foresight of a few courageous conservationists, Duxbury Beach and its environs could have evolved into Honky Tonk City. That it didn't should prompt us all to whisper a prayer of everlasting thanks.

The ownership of this barrier beach can be traced to early colonial grants. The custody then passed through individual hands until 1832 when the Town of Duxbury acquired the

ownership. citizens feared that the sea would break through the beach during severe storms. U.S. Sen. Daniel Webster of Marshfield took up the cause and persuaded the United States Congress to appropriate funds for the stabilization and repair of the dunes. The cost was estimated at \$1,500, and the project was completed in the fall of 1832. Using the federal money, workers constructed a seawall which consisted of seaweed stacked between parallel fencing. The wall was built on the inner side of the beach.

In 1872, for unknown reasons the town decided to sell the beach for \$3,100 to Stephen Allen, an ambitious developer who owned considerable land in the Standish area of

beach into 250 house lots, each measuring 50 feet.

To ensure the success of their plans, the Wrights first needed to make the beach accessible by building a bridge from the mainland. They even considered bringing a trolley or railroad line right to the west end of the proposed bridge on Powder Point, reported Town Historian Kathy Pillsbury. They bought additional land on the south side of Powder Point as part of their development plan.

In 1887, the state granted the Wrights permission to build a 2,200-foot long wooden bridge from the east end of Powder Point to the beach. Once William Wright offered to pay one-third the cost of construction, local opposition dissolved, and the plans were approved at town meeting.

The Gurnet Bridge as it was officially called, was completed in 1892 and included a center draw for vessels to pass through as they traveled to and from the Back River. But residents never took to the name and soon began calling it Long Bridge, or Powder Point Bridge.

After completing bridge, the Wrights succeeded in building three cottages; one at High

Coney Island in New York. Following the death of Georgiana Wright in 1919 (wife of both George, and later William), the Duxbury Beach property was put up for sale by her estate.

By this time, close to 48 cottages and shacks, plus three shooting stands were located on the beach. A concerned group of Duxbury families, realizing they had an extraordinary opportunity to buy the beach and save it from future development, formed the Duxbury Beach Association, a common

Powder Point Bridge and a second at the northern end of the beach. They also addressed problems of beach erosion and traffic.

The association operated the beach from 1919 to 1975. That's when the group of families ran out of steam (it had been 66 years of work and expense) and realized a more permanent organization was needed to continue managing the beach. Thus, the idea of a reservation was born, and the five remaining families transferred their beach ownership in



Leaders of the Duxbury Beach Reservation, which took over management of the beach in 1975, are (L-R) John Leonard, Al Vautrinot, Walter Amory and Charles Fargo, president. Missing are Robert Hayes and Lester Smith.

Photo by David Grossman

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Wednesday, September 4, 2002

Duxbury Clipper

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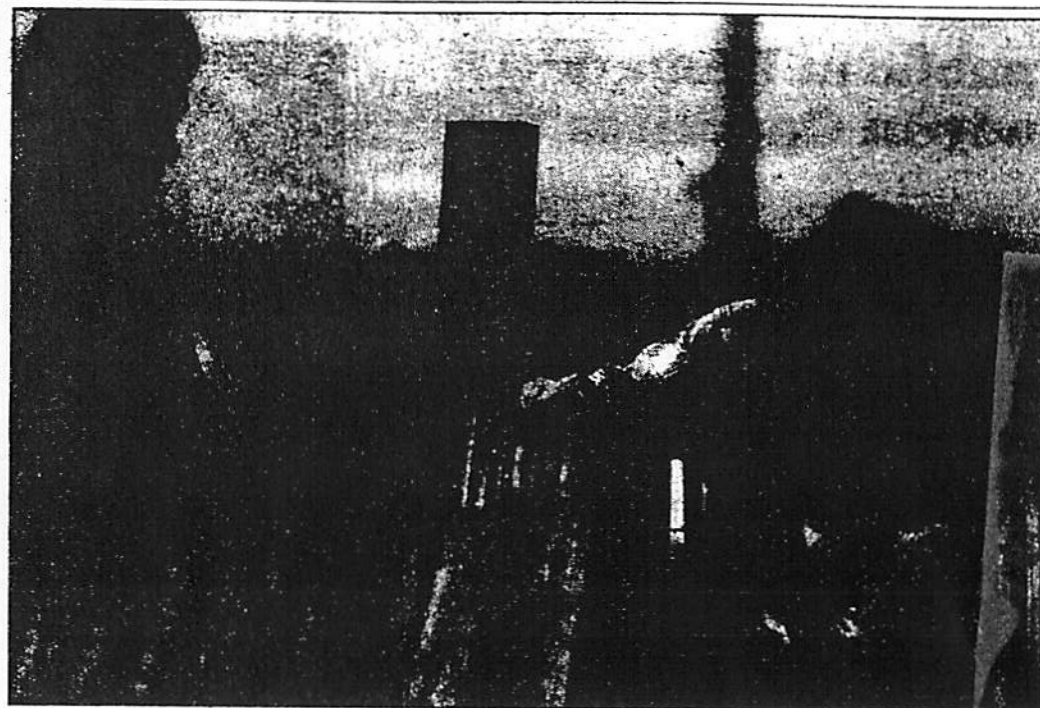
1975 to a newly formed, non-profit charitable corporation called the Duxbury Beach Reservation, Inc. (DBR).

Challenging Currents

Over the years both the Duxbury Beach Association and the Duxbury Beach Reservation have faced repeated challenges from state legislators and mother nature.

"From 1920s through the 1950s, the idea of a state taking arose every few years, but was defeated by watchful representatives, selectmen, and the Beach Association trustees with the help of Duxbury residents," said Kay Foster, a director of the Duxbury Beach Reservation.

In 1928, a bill in the state legislature sought to acquire several beaches including Duxbury Beach. The town rallied, voting 112 to 46 against the acquisition at a town meeting. Concerned over limited



Richard Sjostedt (L) assists Conservation Officer Joe Grady in repairing fencing at the beach this spring.

Photo by David Grossman

tures on a petition protesting the takeover. At a legislative hearing in the State House, Town

so well organized and so vehement that both proposals—the recreation authority and the

storms. Some locals believe the No-Name Storm was up to eight times more devastating

Who's who on Duxbury Beach?

DUXBURY BEACH ASSOCIATION

(1919 – 1975)

Purchased the beach in 1919 from the Wright Estate to preserve it for the benefit of Duxbury, and prevent a prior proposal of a 250-house lot development from ever happening.

DUXBURY BEACH RESERVATION, INC.

(1975 – present)

A charitable trust that in 1975 purchased the beach from the Duxbury Beach Association. The reservation uses its income to maintain and re-

access through narrow town streets, residents also agreed that in the event the Commonwealth did succeed in taking over the beach, Gurnet Bridge would be used solely for foot traffic.

Fortunately, their passion against the takeover squelched legislators' plans and Gurnet Bridge remained untouched by the state. In 1935, there was a second attempt at a state takeover but it, too, failed.

In 1950, new legislation called for a state recreation authority and recommended that the Commonwealth acquire ocean beaches including those in Duxbury and Ipswich. Horrified, Duxbury residents rallied en masse against the measure. They raised money, transported citizens to public hearings and obtained 1,165 signa-

moderator, William McCarthy argued that the increase in Duxbury's population from 2,500 to 9,000 during the summer months "was already taxing our facilities."

There were many speakers that day, but the most impressive was Frederick Pratt, who came prepared with a map of the beach and explained in great detail the downsides of developing such a narrow, low, storm-swept sand spit with access limited to one end. He pointed out that the town had already built a road at the northern end of the beach, from Green Harbor, and that the association had built a parking lot to accommodate 400 cars. In 1941, he testified, the town added another parking area and a bathhouse—all for public use. Opposition at the hearing was

defeated. While the threat of state takeovers was expected on a routine basis, the perils of mother nature were less predictable, and she was less forgiving. On the morning of August 31, 1954, Hurricane Carol swept into Duxbury, unleashing a fury that had not been seen since the Great New England Hurricane of 1938. The devastation was enormous.

According to the anemometer at the Duxbury Yacht Club, Hurricane Carol reach winds of 90 miles per hour as it blasted through Duxbury Beach. Boats of every size and kind were torn from their moorings as though they were toys and giant elms fell across Washington and St. George Streets. During the height of the storm, the ocean submerged huge sections of the beach, doing serious damage to the sand dunes.

The next major storm was the infamous nor'easter known as the Blizzard of 1978. It was considered the "storm of the century," and caused major damage to the New England coastline including Duxbury Beach. When it was over, the beach was pushed back 50 feet in some areas and there were four washovers and five miles of post and cable fencing destroyed. The cost to repair the beach was estimated at \$115,000.

A much more costly storm arrived in late October of 1991. The No-Name or "Perfect Storm" as it has come to be known from Sebastian Junger's book, was a hybrid system of both tropical and mid-latitude

than the Blizzard of '78. It destroyed an estimated 90 percent of the dunes from Brant Rock to Gurnet Point, according to Harbormaster Don Beers. Some 250,000 cubic yards of sand had to be moved back, and it smashed 15 miles of snow fencing that supported the dunes. Gurnet homes were toppled on to their sides.

Al Krahmer, vice-president of operations for the Duxbury Beach Reservation, spearheaded the work to win back the beach after No Name. He coordinated with The Army Corps of Engineers, and brought in heavy equipment to move huge amounts of beach material.

It was clear that the DBR needed help. Its storm budget of \$75,000 was a small fraction of what was required to make repairs, so Margaret Kearney, a trustee of the Reservation, initiated the idea of the Save Duxbury Beach Committee. The committee would raise money to cover the costs of dune replacement, beach grass planting and the replacement of snow and post and cable fencing. Batelle Labs, a local company with a history of local philanthropy, became the headquarters for a fund raising phone-a-thon.

The Save the Beach Committee eventually evolved into the Duxbury Beach Preservation Society. Today, it serves as an arm of the Duxbury Beach Reservation; its principal focus is to raise money through organized fund-raisers, increase public awareness and provide volunteers for beach preservation projects.

store the beach and to protect endangered species.

BEACH PRESERVATION SOCIETY

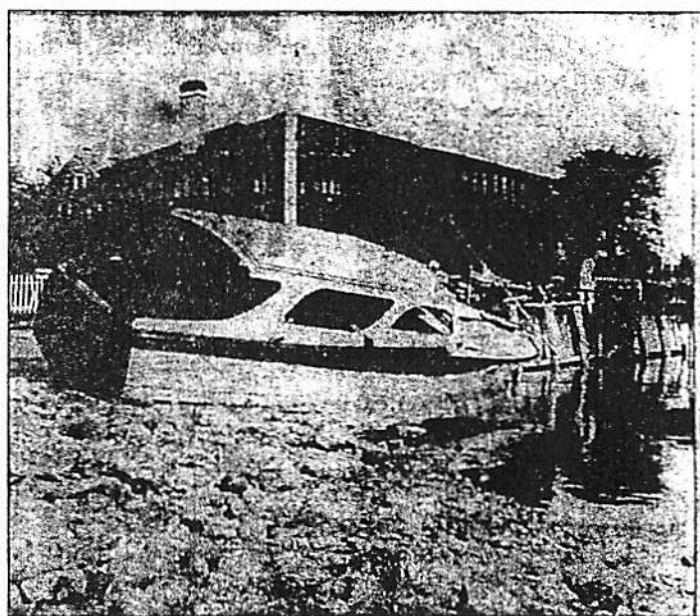
A committee of the Duxbury Beach Reservation. Its members provide financial support through fund-raising and volunteers for specific preservation projects.

TOWN OF DUXBURY

Leases the beach from the Duxbury Beach Reservation. The town provides patrols and determines regulations for use of the beach. The Town sets and collects beach sticker fees.

BEACH COMMITTEE

Assures close communication between the Duxbury Beach Reservation and the Town of Duxbury. The committee is composed of twelve members: the conservation administrator, harbormaster, police chief, three designees of the reservation; six Duxbury residents.



The Great Atlantic Hurricane of 1944 beached this cabin cruiser on the banks of the town landing. In the background is the Elation Clubhouse of the Duxbury Yacht Club.

Courtesy of D.R.H.S.

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CREDITS

"Bay in the Balance" was written by David L. Carter. Special thanks to David Grossman for providing most of the photographs for this series. For more of his work visit www.gurnetroad.com